41 Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

Mr. Abraham Jenkins

THE PEOPLE WERE TREATED SO BADLY

Prior to the establishment of the Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corporation there was no medical care on the islands and everybody had to go to the emergency room in Charleston. The people were treated so badly by the nurses and sometimes the physicians. It was segregated there. And many people died trying to get to medical care waiting on the bridges to open and close.

My father was a fighter. In my case, I retired as a major in the air force in 1971 and moved back home. I figured I'd come back to give my daddy help. I was in a position to help him do some things. I grew up around this work and I guess I would have come back eventually. I spoke to my daddy. He never said I should come back, but just the way he spoke, I knew I should. After talking to some other people, I knew the work needed to be done. When I looked at the groundwork that had been laid by these people, and saw the intensity of their effort and how much sacrifice had been made, I know I said to myself, "I gave the military twenty years, I can give Sea Island twenty." Several of us started trying to put a health program together for the islands.

Mr. Abraham Jenkins

PEOPLE STARTED SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Our community consists of the sea islands west and south of Charleston—five islands altogether. So when we started looking at the needs of the people, we tried to organize a local health council on each of these islands. Either we created or we got to be a part of an existing organization on each island. We started getting input from all of the islands and we started trying to meet their needs. We eventually started dealing with environmental issues, social work, health education, and nutrition.

When some people became interested in the problems of migrant workers on the islands, Rev. Goodwin, my daddy, Bill Saunders, McKinley Washington, and others said, "Well, it's all right to be doing something for the migrants, but whatever the migrants are experiencing for six or eight weeks, the people on the islands are experiencing for the whole year. So whatever we do, it should not be limited just to the migrants." Some of the first issues that were identified were health issues.

They decided they needed to form a rural organization that would deal with these problems the people were having. That was the beginning of Rural Missions, Inc. It started out of the Progressive Club and was formed to address local issues on Johns Island. But then people started seeing the bigger picture and the similarity of the situation on the other islands.

4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

Mr. William Saunders

THE SEA ISLAND HEALTH CARE CORPORATION WAS A POWER BASE

178 185 94 [734] [737] [665] I think the housing, the health care facility, you have to look at it as an elevation, an improvement. We had the foresight with the health center to add the nursing home and the home for the elderly, so even when they took our health center grant away from us, we owned the building and we owned the property. The health center is now being run by the City of Charleston. The taking over was really a political party fight. In 1980 the Republican party needed to be able to say that they got something going on in the community, so what they did, they found problems with a lot of stuff that was already there—got rid of the Board, got a new Board, and allowed it to function.

185 • 741 Anytime you're talking about being able to control something, anytime you're talking about power, then you're talking about something real that was done. The Sea Island Health Care Corporation was a power base that we put together that exists. It really exists today. We've got forty acres of very choice land. The city now wants twelve acres of it. That's the kind of thing where Esau and others were thinking ahead and did things in advance, and we planned that one way ahead of everybody. And it's there. We've got control of the nursing home and the housing. [734] [362]

Mr. William Saunders

THERE'S A LOT OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEALTH AND POVERTY

Our goal for the Comprehensive Health Center was that it would serve everybody on the islands and would be totally independent. The first director, Jim Martin, was a real strategist. He and I used to spend hours dreaming and scheming about what could be, how you could work politically within the system and make things work. Jim was a past master at that.

[758] [464] Beyond just providing health services, for awhile the Health Care Corporation was the biggest employer on the island. We found that when people were working, they were healthier simply because they were making their own living. There's a lot of relationship between health and poverty.

741 758 743 [429] We were looking to be able to sell health care to Kiawah and to Seabrook and to the other big interests on the island, which would have actually made the health center self-sufficient. You would not have needed any governmental money. We were just about there when they took it away from us. We don't have control of the daily operation of the clinic. But the people who are using it have to pay us rent. It's a good bit less service than it used to be. But it could come back. The whole facility is there, so the possibilities are unlimited.

4: Carawan & Carawan B,Z-5 (1959-1988) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina
Johns Island

Today Mrs. Russell talks about not being able to visit her old crabbing spot; she is kept from her homeplace by guards and gates. Ms. Elaine Jenkins straddles the old and new ways trying to show people how not to lose their land. Bill Saunders talks about development and change in a way that is based on his dreams for the indigenous people of the island community; the new developers, on the contrary, want to keep the people off the new vacation spots unless they are employed there, usually in menial jobs.

Today's Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corporation grew out of the Rural Mission, Inc., and the Progressive Club, begun by Esau Jenkins and nurtured by those who struggled with him to bring about change. Their efforts gave much to the local community and to the larger movement. This was the home of the first citizenship education class; "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On" passed from Alice Wine to Guy Carawan to the Nashville sit-ins to movement communities throughout the South.

To walk through this book again is to walk through time. The first edition of the book introduced us to the old songs and the Moving Star Hall and its worship tradition. It described the islanders' yearnings and planning for change. The Carawans were beginning to share the music and culture of this community through folk festivals and programs throughout the nation. In this first book one feels the storm of change in the sound of a unique nineteenth-century black American voice.

And now we have this new edition of the book loaded with some of the same voices speaking through yet another decade; and we see and hear the voices and concerns of the children who walk and seek to extend their roads. We see the outsiders with intentions that have nothing to do with the survival of the communities they found as they moved into the islands. The questions and fears are for the youth and their future. Their voices are heard only as whispers in the minds and hearts of their parents. The questions are: Will they continue? And how and where and what of this rich legacy will they harvest to pass on?

(P-236-B)

Bernice Johnson Reagon